

**WELCOME REMARKS BY OECS CHAIRMAN AT MEETING OF LEADERS
OF PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION IN PREPARATION FOR FIRST
MEETING OF OECS ASSEMBLY
ST. LUCIA, MAY 04, 2012**

Colleagues,

Let me first of all welcome all of you to St Lucia, and encourage you to enjoy the warmth and natural beauty for which this country is so well renowned. For those of you who are visiting our shores for the first time, you have my assurance that the St Lucian experience is one which will forever evoke rich and pleasant memories. Those for whom this is not the first visit will certainly not require my encouragement, and so I say to them simply, “welcome back”!

I also want to thank all of you wholeheartedly for accepting my invitation to attend this encounter which I consider to be essential in our efforts to fashion and build an appropriate institutional architecture for the OECS Economic Union. Indeed, I am of the view that it is only by placing a premium on the involvement of stakeholders such as the Parliamentary Opposition that an enterprise of such significance as the OECS Economic Union can be assured of the popular and political support necessary for achieving sustainability and success well into the future.

This meeting of Leaders and members of the Parliamentary Opposition in the OECS causes me to recall certain events of an earlier time in the history of our region which speak to the enduring nature of our quest for unity and good governance. The first event speaks to the formation in the mid-1980's of an entity called SCOPE, the acronym for Standing Committee of Popular Democratic Parties in the Eastern Caribbean. This entity served as an instrument for networking and mobilization among political parties of broadly similar political or ideological persuasion which had found themselves in the position of Parliamentary opposition in their respective national Legislatures, and soon became a vehicle through which the opposition parties were to engage OECS governments on issues including plans for moving the territories toward political union.

The second event occurred in 2005, and speaks to the dramatic shift that had taken place in the intervening period in the approach to questions of governance. In July of that year I had the privilege and good fortune to chair the historic first (*and only*) Meeting of CARICOM Heads of Government and Leaders of Parliamentary Opposition in St Lucia in the capacities of Lead Head with Responsibility for Justice and Governance, and incoming Chairman of the Caribbean Community. This meeting was convened specifically to build consensus around the CSME and to explore modalities for its advancement.

All of this suggested that we had finally come to the realisation that good governance is about working toward *inclusion*, and that it has little to do with governments assuming solely unto themselves the keys to the solution of our region's problems. Indeed it

suggested the acceptance of a notion which portrays the Westminster system at its finest - that Government *includes* “Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition”.

The people of the OECS (as well as the wider region) have had an enviable record of good governance, and there is much that we could offer to the world by way of example and best practice. There is among our people a certain sophistication which manifests itself in a constant thirst and striving for improvement in the arrangements through which they are governed, and a desire for the ultimate in transparency and accountability. They have come to expect from their leaders the maturity which would cause the people’s interest to be placed above all else, requiring *all* of their representatives to work together to promote that interest. I am myself convinced more than ever of the value of engagement and inclusion, and believe these to represent the surest route to sustainability and long term success.

Colleagues, this meeting serves to confirm that there is in fact a new thinking underlying the governance of our region, and this is why it bears such significance. Not only is this meeting an absolute necessity in the process of advancing the implementation of the OECS Economic Union – in building the consensus required to ensure “buy-in”, sustainability and eventual success; it will also send the requisite signals to the people of our respective countries, the wider region and indeed the world, that the leadership of the countries which constitute the OECS possess the maturity required by the times, are serious about advancing the interests of the people whom they represent, and are prepared to invoke the requisite political will to do that which is necessary to secure the advancement of those interests.

Colleagues, this meeting has been convened in order to brief representatives of the Parliamentary Opposition within OECS Member States about developments in respect of the OECS Economic Union, and in general, to keep alive and to further the process of consultation and engagement which has attended the Economic Union enterprise to date. I do not believe that it should be the only meeting of its kind, and would recommend that an annual engagement between the OECS Authority and Leaders of the Opposition in the OECS be instituted.

The objective of this meeting is to augment the stock of knowledge which you already possess, thereby placing you in a position to contribute even more meaningfully to the development of the Economic Union, either through discussion and debate, or through more direct action. It will also address in particular, issues relating to the inauguration of the OECS Assembly, one of the principal Organs through which the functions and business of the OECS will be realized.

The OECS Assembly evokes memories of the (now dormant) Assembly of Caribbean Community Parliamentarians (ACCP) which was established similarly, to allow for more widespread discussion of issues of regional import among the people through their representatives in Parliament. We must not allow the history of the ACCP which met only three times, to be repeated with the OECS Assembly. While the ACCP was established as an institution of the Caribbean Community, the OECS Assembly has been

established as a *principal organ*, one of five such entities through which the Organisation pursues its purposes and functions under the Revised Treaty. Accordingly, the OECS Assembly is an entity enjoying high standing and visibility, whose existence and functioning are guaranteed under the Treaty.

Colleagues, as members of the Opposition in the Parliaments and Legislatures of your respective countries, you or your chosen representatives are identified under the Revised Treaty of Basseterre (Establishing the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States Economic Union) as principal actors within the OECS Assembly. The members of the government side in the Parliaments and Legislatures of your respective countries have also been similarly identified. This Assembly is expected to symbolize and also to concretize the involvement of the citizenry of the OECS region in the further development and consolidation of the Economic Union. Membership of the Assembly will therefore carry with it a heavy and sacred responsibility, since it is through the participation of the membership that the voice (the views and concerns) of the people of the region will find expression. It is to be expected therefore, that the OECS citizenry will be paying close attention to the deliberations of the Assembly to ensure that their hopes and aspirations for the region are being promoted and championed.

While the OECS Assembly will be a deliberative body which will not have the capacity to make laws, it will nevertheless have the capacity to influence regional policy and legislation. Further, and in keeping with the new thinking that is becoming increasingly a feature of our governance arrangements, government and opposition Parliamentarians will be constituted as national delegations to the Assembly. The challenge for Assembly members would be to function not as Government and Opposition, or as adversaries arrayed against each other in pre-arranged blocs as is the custom, but as delegations from sovereign Parliaments working together to promote the regional interest even while representing and protecting the national interest. An additional challenge would be for members to resist the temptation to use the Assembly as a platform for playing out or resolving matters that are in the order of national partisan politics. It is hardly likely however, that such a situation will find favour with a sophisticated OECS citizenry. I have every confidence in our ability to rise to the challenges that will most certainly present themselves, and look forward with great anticipation to the Assembly's deliberations.

Colleagues, ours is a truly unique and trail-blazing enterprise. We are in uncharted territory, travelling a road, and moving in a direction that no other grouping of Small Island Developing States has travelled before. Mindful of our peculiar circumstances, we have sought to build our own home-grown institutions and systems to address the myriad problems which our countries face as a direct consequence of small size and associated issues. We have recorded significant successes over the years, and in recent times have managed to attain major milestones in spite of resource and other constraints. These achievements, including the signing of the Revised Treaty of Basseterre, the operationalisation of the Economic Union, and the implementation of the Free Movement provisions of the Revised Treaty, all within agreed time-lines, have won for our Organisation the admiration of many in the international community.

I have every confidence that the pace of achievement will continue. Your presence here today is testimony to your commitment to advance the process of implementation of the OECS Economic Union toward the attainment of the next milestone. I look forward to our engagement today, but moreover, to your continued contribution to the development of the OECS region.

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